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C O N F I D E N T I A L BRIDGETOWN 000228

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DEPT FOR WHA/CAR, WHA/AND, WHA/EPSC, AND EEB/ESC/IEC
CARACAS FOR ANDREW BOWEN
SOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/20/2017
TAGS: [PREL](#) [ENRG](#) [EPET](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [VE](#) [DO](#) [ST](#) [XL](#)
SUBJECT: PETROCARIBE #32: CHAVEZ VISIT UNEVENTFUL

REF: A. BRIDGETOWN 213
[1](#)B. BRIDGETOWN 196
[1](#)C. 06 BRIDGETOWN 1897

Classified By: DCM Mary Ellen T. Gilroy for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On February 16-17, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez visited Dominica and St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The visit was light on substance and heavy on atmospherics, as he reiterated past Petrocaribe-related promises and resorted to his usual vitriolic anti-American talking points. While Chavez's anti-Americanism gained little traction, his promises of assistance were warmly welcomed by the two countries, which are among the poorest in the Eastern Caribbean. End Summary.

DOMINICA

[1](#)2. (C) On February 16, President Hugo Chavez's visit to Dominica marked only the second time that a non-Caribbean leader visited the country. Although Chavez was warmly welcomed by Dominica's PM Roosevelt Skerrit, Dominica's Minister of Education, Mario Michel, told EmbOffs that "Chavez announced nothing new or grand and most of the visit was a reiteration of ongoing projects." Chavez toured a 5,000-barrel fuel storage facility just outside the capital of Roseau. The storage facility is one of five that the Venezuelan government pledged to build under the Petrocaribe program. According to press reports, Chavez addressed a large crowd at the storage facility, delivering his usual anti-American fulminations. Ironically, this avowed anti-imperialist also proclaimed that "An Empire of Latin America and the Caribbean will be greater than the empire of Star Wars and cannot be stopped." Dominica's officials carefully sought to distance themselves from Chavez's rhetoric. For example, Dominica's Foreign Minister, Charles Savarin, told the press "we are friends with the United States" and assured the public that close ties to Caracas would not adversely affect Dominica's relationship with Washington.

[1](#)3. (C) Discussions between Chavez and PM Skerrit also included a proposed refinery that would process some 10,000 barrels a day. Edison James, leader of the opposition United Workers Party, told EmbOff that the refinery project would not necessarily be welcomed by the people of Dominica. Already, the proposal drew sharp criticism from Atherton Martin, president of the Barbados-based Caribbean Conservation Association, who told the press that the

proposed refinery is "incompatible with the image of the country as a nature island."

ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES

14. (C) After his visit to Dominica, Hugo Chavez traveled to St. Vincent and the Grenadines on February 17, where he and PM Ralph Gonsalves "unveiled" a liquid natural gas facility constructed under the Petrocaribe program. Chavez also toured the location where a new fuel storage facility will be built. Brian Glasgow, a political insider who is now with KPMG, told EconOff that PM Gonsalves played along with Chavez's penchant for flashy displays by staging a rally with more than 2,000 people dressed in red T-shirts. During his speech, Chavez called on the Caribbean to be a "sea of resistance" against U.S. imperialism and criticized free trade agreements with the United States. As was the case in Dominica, Chavez's anti-American attacks drew no noticeable support in St. Vincent. Glasgow explained that while PM Gonsalves is prepared to accept Chavez's antics in exchange for assistance, pro-American feelings among Vincentians were quite firm.

COMMENT

15. (C) Chavez's roadshow was another step in his effort to forge an ideological and political coalition in the Eastern Caribbean aimed at undermining the region's historically strong relations with the United States. The United States remains the Eastern Caribbean's number one trade partner, linked by language, historical experience, culture, and family ties. However, this relationship has been weakened by what the Eastern Caribbeans perceive as a lack of attention--and assistance--from the United States. Dominica's PM Skerrit recently urged more high level visits by U.S. officials (ref B). St. Vincent's Foreign Minister Sir Louis Straker was more blatant when he promised then-Ambassador Kramer his country's loyalty if the United States would pay for St. Vincent's new airport (ref C). Venezuela, China, and Cuba have shown themselves ready and willing to exploit these perceptions of U.S. disengagement and the genuine economic vulnerabilities in the Eastern Caribbean. While it would not be useful for the United States to try to match Venezuela, China, and Cuba's generosity dollar for dollar, the United States should continue to make every effort to maintain a visible U.S. presence in the Eastern Caribbean through U.S. officials' visits and well targeted assistance to shore up our partnership with the region.

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